



Wilma Mankiller

by Linda Lowery

**An old saying
states, “You can’t
go home again.”
Wilma Mankiller
proved the saying
wrong. She
returned to her
home and became
its chief.**

Connect to Your Life

Recall the last time you found yourself in a strange place. How long did it take you to get used to it? Make a list of what made the place different. With a partner, talk about the kinds of adjustments you had to make.

Key to the Biography

This biography describes major happenings in the life of Wilma Mankiller. She belongs to the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. The Cherokee once lived happily in the southeastern sections of the country. Then came the winter of 1838–1839. U.S. soldiers forced more than 17,000 Cherokee people to leave their homeland. This event became known as the Trail of Tears. As you read, pay close attention to the details about this event. Although Wilma wasn’t born until more than a century later, notice the effects the event has on her life.

Vocabulary Preview

Words to Know

coyotes	council
bugles	swirling



Reading Coach CD-ROM selection

FOCUS

Young Wilma Mankiller finds herself in a new place. Read to find out how the differences there affect her.

San Francisco, 1956

Wilma Mankiller dove under the covers. It was warm and safe under the handmade quilt. Outside, screams of wild animals echoed off the walls. This was Wilma's first night in San Francisco, California, and she was afraid.

She knew the sound of wolves. The sound outside was not wolves. She knew the sound of **coyotes**. It was not coyotes.

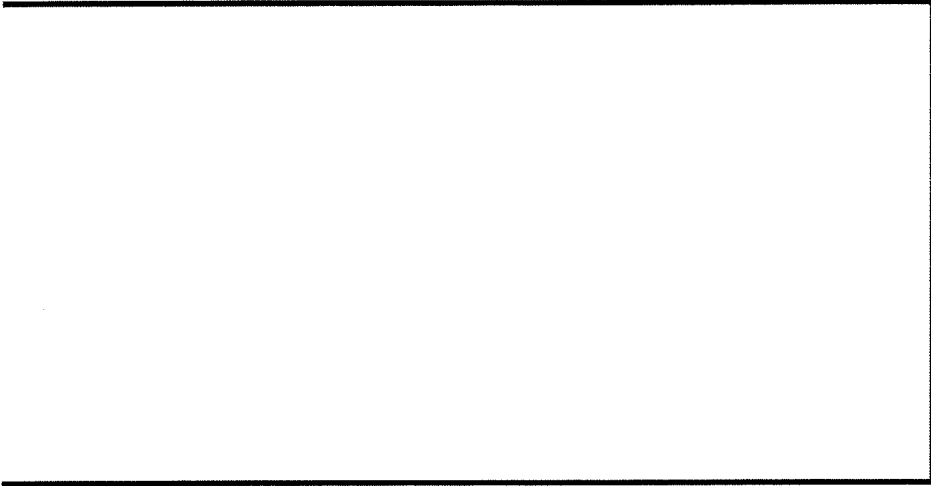
When she woke up the next morning,
10 still yawning from too little sleep, Wilma found out what had made the animal screams. It was something she had never heard back home in Oklahoma. It was the sound of police sirens.

San Francisco was full of things Wilma had never seen or heard of before. People disappeared from her hallway in boxes called elevators.

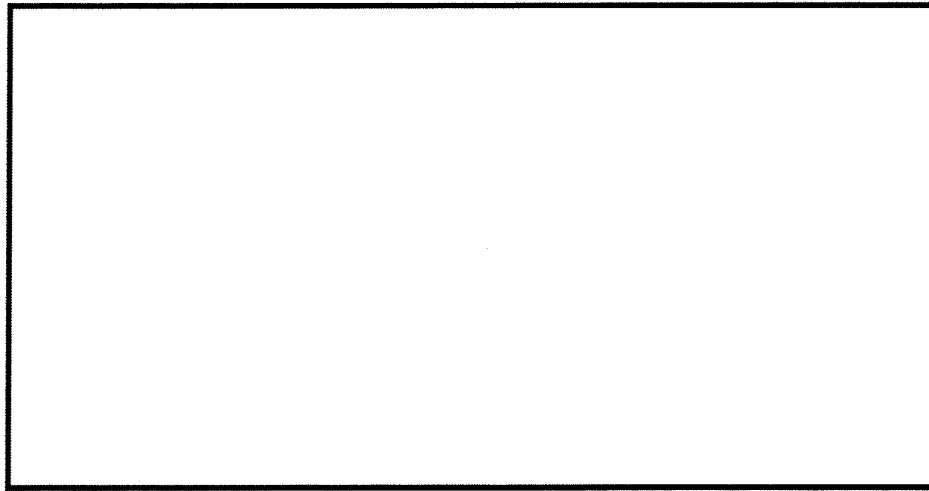
coyotes

(kī ō' tēz)

n. small animals that are similar to wolves



A view of the city of San Francisco



A view of the Oklahoma plains

All night long, flashy lights blinked on and off outside her window. Everything seemed strange and
20 frightening, so different from home.

In her mind, Wilma traveled back to her grandfather's land on Mankiller Flats, in Oklahoma. Her family was happy there, living close to other Cherokee families. They had springwater to drink, woods full of deer and foxes, and a home her father had built.

But Wilma's father, Charley Mankiller, often worried about money. Money never went very far when there were nine children to raise. He wanted to
30 give them the best schools, the best home, the best life he could.

When Wilma was ten, the United States government came up with a plan for Indian families. They promised houses and jobs to families who would move to cities. At night, in their house on Mankiller Flats, Wilma and her brothers and sisters pressed their ears against the bedroom door, listening. Their parents talked about moving. They talked about cities

like Chicago, New York, and Detroit. Would the
40 schools be better in the city? Would life there be
happier for their children?

Moving sounded awful to Wilma. Her parents,
however, decided it was a good idea. In October
1956, the family moved away from Mankiller Flats.

As they left, Wilma watched very hard out the car
window. She wanted to remember everything about
the home she loved: the colors of the birds, the shapes
of the trees, the sounds of the animals.

THINK IT THROUGH

Why is moving to San Francisco such a major change for
Wilma?

FOCUS

Read to discover what helps Wilma get used to her new
surroundings.

In her new home, colors and shapes and sounds
50 were scary—and mean too. When Wilma’s new
teacher called her name in school, the class laughed.
To Cherokees, “Mankiller” was a special title, given
to someone who protected the tribe. To the kids in
school, it was a joke. They teased her about how she
talked. They thought she dressed strangely.

When Wilma walked home from school,
she saw signs in shop windows. They
said, “NO DOGS, NO INDIANS.”
Wilma felt as if she had moved to the far
60 side of the moon.

REREAD

What does a sign
like this say
about some
people in
Wilma’s new
city?

To comfort herself, Wilma thought about home: the
hawks soaring in the sky, the whispers of the wind in
the treetops.

She also thought of other Cherokees who had struggled through hard times. About 150 years ago, many Cherokee people were forced to move far from home. It was a terrible journey. It is called the Trail of Tears. Wilma remembered the story the way she had heard it many times from her father and her relatives.

The Trail of Tears, 1838

70 Years ago, Wilma's family told her, no Cherokees lived in Oklahoma. Their home was the southeast. How they loved that land! Soft rain fell on the hills. Apples, plums, and peaches grew on the trees.

But white settlers wanted the green land of the southeast. President Andrew Jackson decided that white settlers were more important than the Indians who lived there. In 1830, the president signed the Indian Removal Act.

It was a law. It said that all Cherokees had to leave
80 Georgia and Alabama, North Carolina and South

Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. The Cherokees refused. They loved their home.

So, in 1838, President Van Buren sent in the army. Soldiers dragged Cherokees from their log cabins. Soldiers loaded Cherokees onto wagons. Soldiers shot Cherokees who tried to get away.

The **bugles** sounded. The wagons began rolling away. Children stood up and waved good-bye to their mountain homes. The

90 Cherokees traveled 1,200 miles west, through rain, sleet, and snow. When wagons broke down, some people had to walk.

bugles

(byōō' gəlz)
n. horns that are shorter than a trumpet

In the next two years, about 17,000 Cherokees were sent west. Four thousand died on the way. The army left the Cherokees on land that later became Oklahoma. There were no houses, no churches, and no schools.

100 Many mothers and fathers, children and grandparents, were sick from the trip. They had nothing left but the spirit within them. Because of that spirit, they survived.

REREAD

How do you think this move affected the people who lived through it?

Wilma had always kept the story of the Trail of Tears in her heart. She was the great-great-great-granddaughter of the people who had cried on that trail. In San Francisco, Wilma cried too. There, she felt lucky about only one thing. The Cherokee people who had been shipped to Oklahoma never got to go back home. Wilma knew that one day, she would go
110 home again.

THINK IT THROUGH

How does Wilma compare her move to the Trail of Tears?

FOCUS

Wilma does return to Mankiller Flats. Read to see what new challenges she finds there.

Home Again in Oklahoma, 1977

It took her over twenty years, but Wilma did go home. By then, in 1977, she had two daughters, Gina and Felicia. She packed them up and moved back to Mankiller Flats.

It felt wonderful to be near Cherokee friends again. She was happy to watch the robins and bluebirds from her porch. She heard the coyotes howl in the moonlight, and she wasn't afraid.

Wilma soon got a job with the Cherokee Nation.

120 Cherokeees are people of two nations: the United States and the Cherokee Nation. The government in Washington, D.C., makes all the big decisions in the United States. The government in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, makes all the big decisions in the Western Cherokee Nation.

Wilma's job was to visit Cherokee people all over eastern Oklahoma. Many were poor. They had no lights in their houses and no water. Wilma helped them make their homes safer and better. One day in 130 1983, Wilma was on her way to work. She drove down a dirt road, thinking. The chief of the Cherokee Nation had offered her a job yesterday. He wanted her to be his assistant and run for deputy chief. What an **honor** to be asked! This was the second highest job in the Cherokee Nation.

honor
(ŏn' ər)
sign of great respect

But Wilma was a quiet person. To become deputy chief, she would have to win an election. She did not like talking to crowds. She didn't 140 want to be on television. "No," she had told the

chief. Chief Swimmer had been disappointed. “Think about it,” he said. Now, as she drove along, she wondered if she had made the right decision.

Suddenly, she saw something through the oak trees. She stopped her station wagon and stared out the window. There sat an old, broken-down bus. Curtains hung in the windows. Laundry sagged on the line. Was this really someone’s home?

REREAD

Try to picture this scene in your mind. What kind of life do you think the people who live here lead?

150 Wilma got out of her car and walked closer. She could see that a family lived inside.

The bus had no roof. What happens when it rains? she wondered.

Deep inside her, something tugged at Wilma. When she was a girl, the United States government had promised a better life for Indians in San Francisco. They broke their promise. If Wilma were deputy chief, she would have power to help change the lives of Cherokee people. She knew she would keep her

160 promises.

Stones flew as Wilma drove to Chief Swimmer’s house. She had something to tell him. Her time to be a leader had come. She would run for deputy chief.

THINK IT THROUGH

Why doesn’t Wilma want the job of deputy chief? What changes her mind?

FOCUS

New problems come from an unexpected place. Read to find out how Wilma tries to solve them.

Wilma got right to work. She swallowed her shyness and talked to crowds of people. She asked them to vote for her. The Cherokee people had always

been grateful for Wilma's work. They had given her warm welcomes when she visited.

But suddenly people were unfriendly, even angry.
170 Something was very wrong. Wilma could feel it. Soon the truth came out. People were talking behind Wilma's back.

"We Cherokees never had a woman as deputy chief," they said. "It's a job for a man," they said. Wilma was shocked. What a strange idea! In history, Cherokee women had always been treated the same as men.

Women were medicine healers. Women were warriors. Women were council
180 members. How could anyone say only men make good leaders? Had the Cherokees picked up this idea from white people? Wilma thought so.

council (koun' səl) <i>n.</i> body of people elected to plan, discuss, or give advice
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When white settlers came to America,
they brought new ideas with them. Some of their
ideas were good. Some were not. One idea was that
men were more important than women. Wilma set
out to prove that this idea was wrong. In her
speeches, she never talked about being a woman. She
190 only talked about her hopes and dreams for the
Cherokee people. She promised to get money for
houses, hospitals, and children's centers. She promised
to help her people make their towns better.

The trouble did not stop. Neither did Wilma.
Someone slashed the tires on Wilma's car. Strangers
shouted mean words on the phone. Someone
threatened to kill her. Everything around
her was **swirling** like a whirlwind. But
inside, Wilma kept still. She reached deep
200 down for strength. Long ago, her people
had survived the Trail of Tears. When she
was young, Wilma had survived San Francisco. Wilma
and the people who cried on the trail had survived
because they knew the
Cherokee Way.

swirling

(swûr' lîng)
v. moving with a
twisting motion

Wilma Mankiller standing before the
seal of the Cherokee Nation

You do not think about
the bad things. You think
about the good. Even if you
feel you will never make it,
210 you move ahead. It is called
"being of good mind." If
she practiced the Cherokee
Way, Wilma knew she
could survive—and win—
this election. Finally, the
Cherokee people went to

the **polls** to vote. They voted for Chief Swimmer and Wilma Mankiller. On August 14, 1983, Wilma became the first Cherokee
220 woman ever to be deputy chief. But that was only the beginning.

polls
(pōlz)
places where
votes are cast

When Chief Swimmer was given a job in Washington, D.C., Wilma became chief.

It was 1985 when Wilma sat down at the chief's desk for the first time. "You look very natural sitting there," someone said. People hugged Wilma. They cried tears of happiness for her.

Wilma knew her job as chief would be hard work. But she was not frightened. She felt as if all the
230 Cherokee people who had walked the Trail of Tears were with her. Their strength was her strength, just as it had been when she was a girl in San Francisco. Wilma had come home to Oklahoma. Now she was Chief Mankiller, the first woman chief in Cherokee history.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. Before she got the job, Wilma Mankiller faced both inner and outer conflicts, or problems. List both the inner and outer problems she overcame.
2. Review the different hardships Wilma Mankiller faced. Why did she succeed?
3. What qualities helped Wilma become a good leader? Use details from the text to support your choices.